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9-11-2009

## The Complex Simplicity of Teaching Fiction Writing

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Panel: Teaching Writing

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### Recommended Citation

Santaella, Fedosy, "The Complex Simplicity of Teaching Fiction Writing" (2009). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 773.

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## THE COMPLEX SIMPLICITY OF TEACHING FICTION WRITING

### Structures

Let's say, before I begin, that this all is based on my personal experience. I've been tinkering in this way, and I teach what I learn. So, in this strange work of trying to teach fiction writing, I have met certain needs that people have. And when I say people I am talking about engineers, lawyers, accountants; people from scientific and humanistic professions that have nothing to do with creative writing.

I know this will sound obvious, but people who want to learn to write, must write. I say this seriously, because back in Venezuela I've known more than a few “theoretical” writing workshop professors who teach only high voltage theory or something else suspicious taken from Wikipedia. For example, if you search for “hero” in the Spanish Wikipedia, you will find information that is not bad, but very superficial. And if you take this information and teach with it, you are not doing anything really important, and also you are cheating your students. Theories are good, of course, and I think we must know them during the workshop, but they cannot cover the entire workshop or even a large part of it.

Often a person who is beginning to write doesn't know that to write fiction is to assemble a structure, which is what I think and what I teach. They come to writing with lots of innocence. However, angels are full of good intentions, and so is the road to hell. Thus, one of the first things I say in my workshops produces a disaster for some very respectable ladies and causes nervous laughter in the rest of the room: I say that writing belongs to the forces of evil. A writer, I continue, should be wicked. This does not mean that they cannot write love stories. You can write the most beautiful love story ever told, but you must still be evil enough to know how to tell the history and keep the reader trapped until the end of the text. Part of this evil is in the structures.

Now, you may wonder what structures I'm talking about. They are the narrator, the point of view, grammar... I talk about the importance of maintaining the logical cohesion of detail, and I also make my students understand they can take structures for creative writing from elsewhere. I speak then, for example, about instruction manuals, or biographies, which are descriptive texts, and make the students see that they can take all of these like empty boxes and put fiction inside them. Then, I read them the famous instruction manuals of Julio Cortázar in *Historias de Cronopios y famas* (*Cronopios and Famas*), which include instructions as varied as How to Cry, How to Kill Ants in Rome, and How to Comb the Hair. After that, I ask the students to write “instructions not to go crazy”. The results are wonderful in most cases. I think it's because everybody knows how to become crazy, but not how to get out of there.

My students also find screenwriting structures helpful. I teach the basic paradigm presented by Syd Field in his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. I talk about the three moments in history according to Field: set-

up, confrontation and resolution, and about plot-points. I also emphasize the *need* of the character, and how actions define both the character and the need. I insist on action. I do this, because I think when the novice writer tries to write a character subjectively, the interior voice becomes drawn and falsely exquisite, and so mediocre. Like the old Chinese masters of martial arts, I think we should start hauling the bucket of water uphill before giving the first punch. I think you have to be orthodox, and not allow very “literary” detours.

### **Stories**

My hope is for people to tell stories, and forget, initially, the theme. By theme I mean a superior intellectual, philosophical thinking that goes beneath the text. People want to tell a story; whether about death, suicide, madness, infidelity, fatherhood... But thinking about these complex things (the theme, let’s say again) can cause people to run out of fuel, and then they become terrified of the road and stop. The theme is a serial killer of stories.

Narrative is the art of storytelling. Sometimes writers forget that it is extremely difficult to tell a good story. Sometimes people who talk about “art” and “themes” and “inner speech” in literature forget, for example, that Cervantes wrote for the people, and that Shakespeare also wrote for the people, and, moreover, for a theater audience. I do not see why you cannot find your inner needs in the stories you tell.

### **Simplicity**

To teach writing, especially to the “ordinary” people I mentioned earlier, I think we should start from the simple and practical. I ask people to write and also to read literature. Reading is also important, reading literature, not cheap Wikipedia theories. John Maeda, in *The Laws of Simplicity*, says that simplicity equals sanity. But beware. We should not take this simplicity lightly. Maeda says: “Through my ongoing journey I’ve discovered how complex a topic Simplicity really is, and I do not pretend to have solved the puzzle.” Teaching simplicity is a complex issue that I must keep considering. And for now, I’m still on the road, learning.